

**‘TRIBES OF MONTANA’  
TRANSCRIPT  
(Running Time: 35 minutes)**

**CHAPTER 1 (TRT: 1:50)  
TRIBES OF MONTANA**

**Sally Thompson**

Today we’ll learn about the tribes of Montana and how they got their names. This subject takes us back to the early 1800s when sign language was commonly used to communicate with people who didn’t know each other’s languages. Of the names we use today for Montana tribes, some come from names other tribes gave them and others came from European misunderstandings of sign language. We’ll learn the signs used to refer to the different tribes, some of which were misinterpreted and led to the names we use today. We will also learn the names the tribes use to refer to themselves. To begin, listen to the names we use today for the tribes of Montana and get a sense of where they now live.

**Clover Smith: Assiniboine**

**Iris Prettypaint: Blackfeet**

**Darcy Anaquad: Chippewa**

**Darcy Anaquad: Cree**

**Stan Prettypaint: Crow**

**Darrell Martin: Gros Ventre**

**Frances Vanderburg: Kootenai**

**Ward Redbird: Northern Cheyenne**

**Francis Cullooyah: Pend d’Oreille**

**Frances Vanderburg: Salish**

**Clover Smith: Sioux**

**CHAPTER 2 (TRT: 5:30)  
SIGN LANGUAGE, MISNOMERS**

**Sally Thompson**

In the 1830s a fur trader named Warren Ferris was intrigued by some of the strange and inappropriate names he heard for tribes in the region. According to Ferris many tribes had names that described some physical characteristic: Flat-heads; Pierced-noses; Big-Bellies; but that none of the tribes displayed the noted physical traits. He wrote about this in his journal. For the first group, the Flatheads, he noticed that not one showed any signs of a deformed head. For the next group, the Nez Perce, [Pierced Nose, in French] he didn’t see anyone with a pierced nose. And finally he reported that the Gros Ventre [Big Belly, in French] are as slim as any other Indians. What are the sources of these unusual names? We believe that many of these misnomers came about because European travelers long ago misinterpreted sign language.

**Louis Adams, Salish**

See the universal language was sign language.

**Sally Thompson**

For those who didn't speak other languages, the tribes of the Great Plains developed a way to communicate through signs. No one knows how old this language might be. How do we learn about sign language? The most important source is the people themselves. Some people still speak sign language and many of their grandchildren understand it.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

I remember my grandfather and when he would talk to us, he would sign. It's that 'Indian can't hold his hands still.' And so we learned a lot of the different signs for different things like, me, you, the simple signs. And some of the tribal signs, what they called each other and clan signs. Each tribe had their own sign for themselves and then another tribe would have a sign for them as they saw them.

**Sally Thompson**

Another source of information comes from research done over a century ago when sign talking was a common practice. We integrate sign language information from a book by W.P. Clark, who spent time with many Indian tribes in the 1870s and 1880s, learning all he could about sign language. Another source of information comes from tapes made at the 1930 Sign Language Preservation Conference held in Browning, Montana. This sign talker gathering brought together the best of the sign talkers who still lived in the area in 1930. It was easy to get confused if you were a traveler from afar because variations in signs from one tribe to another and from one person to another. Names reflect different points of view and they are not necessarily the same from place to place. People have names they call themselves, but other people don't usually use these names. Instead, tribes carry names given by others. These names vary depending on the relationships with neighbors. You might understand this better when you think of your own neighborhood. Maybe you have neighbors you refer to by the color of their house, the kind of car they drive, or something they do that you think is funny. Let's look at an example from a tribe that used to be part of Montana, the Northern Shoshone and Bannick people who now live at Fort Hall, Idaho. The sign commonly used for Shoshone by Plains Tribes is shown by Rob Collier, from the Nez Perce tribe. (**sign for Shoshone**) The Term Snake for the Shoshone is a misnomer. Ronald 'Snake' Edmo explains this to us.

**Ronald 'Snake' Edmo, Shoshone**

In our culture, we refer to ourselves either as the location that we come from or the type of food that we eat. What is known today as a Lemhi Shoshone, they call themselves a <Native language>, which means salmon eaters. And of course, the sign language that was used on the plains was a waving motion. Well, the white people thought that meant a snake, so they called us the Snake Indians. We call ourselves Nu-We, or 'the people.'

**Sally Thompson**

Another misnomer is the name Nez Perce, people who live just west of Montana. Lewis and Clark had been told about these people, and may have been the first to confuse the name. From the Shoshones on August 14, 1805, Meriwether Lewis learns of some people whom he refers to as 'persed nose' Indians. Lewis apparently misconstrues the gesture,

**(sign for Nez Perce)** the original meaning of which is unknown. W.P. Clark reports that the gesture of passing the index finger under and close to nose is the common sign for the Nez Perce. But he also mentions that the Blackfeet sometimes make the sign for powder, because the people we know as Nez Perce used a bluish black paint to paint themselves. Blackfeet speakers still refer to the Nez Perce as the Blue mud people.

### **Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

The Blackfeet people, they called us the Blue Powder or Blue Mud people because that's what we painted our faces with, was a blue paint made from a blue powder or a blue mud.

### **Sally Thompson**

Nez Perce people say they never pierced their noses. They call themselves...

### **Horace Axtell, Nez Perce**

Niimi-pu. Niimi-pu, that's what we call ourselves, Nez Perce. It means 'we the people.'

## **CHAPTER 3 (TRT: 8:00)**

### **WEST OF THE DIVIDE**

#### **Sally Thompson**

So you can better understand how sign language can be misinterpreted, you'll be watching the signs for tribes of Montana and writing down what you think they mean. We're not going to tell you which tribe is which the first time through. You're going to want to take out a pencil and paper and number your page from 1 to 13, since you'll be guessing the meaning of 13 signs. There are no wrong answers. Just use your imagination and have fun. You'll have 10 seconds to complete your guess before the next sign appears. We'll show you the signs again afterward when we discover how the tribes of Montana got their names, many of which were misunderstandings of the signs. Using your pencil and paper, watch the signs and write down what you think they mean. You might not have heard the name before, so just write down what you think the sign shows following the gesture made by Rob Collier.

Sign number 1. What do you think this sign means?

**(sign # 1 – Kootenai).**

Number 2

**(sign # 2 – Pend d'Oreille)**

Number 3

**(sign # 3 – Salish)**

Just imagine if you were traveling long ago and had to watch those signs along with all sorts of other information. I bet there were lots of misunderstandings. Now let's go back through history and see how the tribes of Western Montana got their names. This is where you can compare your guess with the interpretation others made long ago. The sign number will appear before each sign we review so you can compare it to your guess. In Western Montana three tribes live on the Flathead Reservation, the Kootenai, the Pend d'Oreille, and the Salish. Rob Collier shows us one sign for the Kootenai. Sign number 1. Kootenai, sign for white tail deer.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(sign # 1) People of the white tailed deer.

**Vernon Finley, Kootenai**

We say Kootenais today, but the word Kootenai doesn't really mean anything in the language. It was a name that was given, I assume from some other tribe, what they called us. Then it was a mispronunciation of whatever that word is because none of the other neighboring tribes, it doesn't mean anything in their language either. But how the Kootenai always referred to themselves was through their tribal affiliation, through their specific band. In past history the people were called Ktunaxa, and the way that you pronounce it, it can mean slightly different things. One of the ways is that it means, 'eating food plain' with no seasoning. The other translation of it, let's say we went into battle with our enemies and one of us shot an arrow into one of our enemies and killed them. Somebody would go over there and pull the arrow back out and lick the blood off of the arrow. That's Ktunaxa. There are seven bands of Kootenais. The band that lived in the area that's referred to today as Montana is the Ksanka band. The band Ksanka is standing arrow.

**Sally Thompson**

The Pend d'Oreille are also based on the Flathead Reservation in their original homeland. This is the upper Pend d'Oreille, the lower Pend d'Oreille or the Kalispel tribe live in Eastern Washington on the Pend d'Oreille River. This name is a French term for earrings, probably derived from sign language. Number 2, Pend d'Oreille. The sign indicates ear pendant.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(sign # 2) Pend d'Oreille.

**Francis Culloyah, Kalispel**

When the first white man came to this area, there was a lot of the Indian men that wore an earring, or earrings and they used the shells, the abalone shells and the different kinds of shells for decoration. And I would only imagine that the first Frenchmen that came through the area, saw that protrusion coming from the ear, so they called us Pend d'Oreille.

**Sally Thompson**

The proper name for Pend d'Oreille, the name by which they call themselves is...

**Vernon Finley**

Qaesp'e. The Pend d'Oreilles called themselves Qaesp'e, and that became mispronounced into Kalispel.

**Sally Thompson**

The Salish are the third group that makes up the people of the Flathead Reservation.

**Frances Vanderburg, Salish**

Salish, a term used to designate Salish speaking tribes.

**Sally Thompson**

Rob Collier shows us the sign used for the Salish. Number 3.

**Frances Vanderburg, Salish**

Salish

**Sally Thompson**

Sign indicates head flat on sides.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 3)

**Sally Thompson**

Apparently some early French traders misinterpreted this sign to mean Flathead as evidenced by the use of the term Tete Plat, which means flat head in French. In September of 1805, Lewis and Clark arrived at camp of these people on the Bitterroot River. William Clark adds to the confusion about names by recording another name in his journal. 'They call themselves...

**Louis Adams, Salish**

'Oat la shoot.'

**Sally Thompson**

According to Louis Adams, this term was a misunderstanding.

**Louis Adams, Salish**

Not only was Flathead a misnomer, so was 'Oat la shoot.' And when the Indians, our people met Lewis and Clark's band and due to the communication they had to use sign language. Well one of their people must have told Three Eagles, just like that, you know, where are you people from? Where do you live? And he probably, because they met him way up in the high country so he probably just turned around and said <Salish>, down below. And that's what that means, so they wrote it down, 'Oat la shoot,' and that wasn't right. <Salish>, is down below.

**Sally Thompson**

The Salish call themselves...

**Frances Vanderburg, Salish**

Sqelio, meaning 'the people'

**Sally Thompson**

Let's review. In Western Montana three tribes live on the Flathead Reservation: the Kootenai, the Pend d'Oreille, and the Salish. The Salish are also known as Flatheads although that's a misnomer as we've discussed. The Kootenai call themselves...

**Vernon Finley, Kootenai**

Ktunaxa.

**Sally Thompson**

And the Pend d'Oreille call themselves...

**Vernon Finley, Kootenai**

Qaesp'e.

**Sally Thompson**

The Salish call themselves...

**Frances Vanderburg, Salish**

Sqelio, meaning 'the people.'

**CHAPTER 4 (TRT: 15:48)**

**EAST OF THE DIVIDE**

**Sally Thompson**

Now let's head east of the Continental Divide. In Montana, there are six reservations on the east side of the Divide: the Blackfoot Reservation, Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, Crow, and Northern Cheyenne.

Number 4. What do you think this sign means?

**(sign # 4 – Blackfeet)**

Number 5

**(sign # 5 - Blood)**

Number 6

**(sign # 6 – Piegan)**

**Iris Prettypaint, Pikuni**

There are three groups of Blackfeet, two in Canada the Blackfoot or Siksika, and the Blood or Kainai. And another group of two bands, one in Canada and another on the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana, known as the Pikuni, or some people say Piegan. The three bands are referred to as the Blackfoot Confederacy.

**Sally Thompson**

Number 4.

**Iris Pretty Paint, Pikuni**

Blackfoot

**Sally Thompson**

The sign indicates black moccasins.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 4) Blackfoot.

**Sally Thompson**

Number 5.

**Iris Prettypaint, Pikuni**

Blood

**Sally Thompson**

The act of wiping off a bloody nose. This is a misnomer. The sign actually referred to the way they painted their faces.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 5) Blood.

**Sally Thompson**

Number 6.

**Iris Prettypaint, Pikuni**

Piegane or Pikuni in our language

**Sally Thompson**

The sign represents rubbing cheek with raw hide spot in a robe.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 6)

**Darrell Kipp, Pikuni**

The Blackfoot people or the Pikuni as they're known in their language are the spotted robes.

**Sally Thompson**

No one knows for sure why this large tribe got the name Blackfeet. Some say that another group observed them walking across some scorched earth that had turned their moccasins black and that's how they got their name.

**Iris Prettypaint, Pikuni**

The name Blackfeet is a name that was given to us by the Federal Government. It's a federal distinction that we use, but we call ourselves Niitsitapi, 'the real people.'

**Sally Thompson**

Let's review. The Piegan Blackfeet, or Pikuni, live on the Blackfeet Reservation. They call themselves...

**Iris Prettypaint, Pikuni**

Niitsitapi, 'the real people.'

**Sally Thompson**

What do you think this sign means? Number 7.

**(sign # 7 – Gros Ventre)**

The name Gros Ventre means 'big belly' in French. The Gros Ventre tribe is based on the Fort Belknap Reservation. Number 7, Gros Ventre, the sign for the falls.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 7) People of the falls.

**Sally Thompson**

To explain the origins of the name Gros Ventre, tribal representative, Darrell Martin, suggests it is a misnomer.

**Darrell Martin, Gros Ventre**

Just misinterpretation of the Falls People. Were actually from the south fork of the Saskatchewan River and it's pretty high up north. And the sign language of course is for falls, and then we're also known as the White Clay People because we used to dig white clay and that would clean your robes. One of the misinterpretations by the French was the sign language. Of course the falls, as your hands fall down, and they misinterpret that as big belly, so Gros Ventre in French means Big Belly, so that's just a misinterpretation of the name. Our official names in my language is <A-a-ninin>, which means upright man, or upright person, or otherwise White Clay or Falls people.

**Sally Thompson**

This misnomer of Gros Ventre came about from a misunderstanding of the sign language for the Falls Indians, who were also known as White Clay or Upright people.

Let's review. The Gros Ventre are based at Fort Belknap. The name Gros Ventre is a misnomer, based on a misunderstanding of sign language. They were called the Falls People or White Clay people by their neighbors and called themselves...

**Darrell Martin, Gros Ventre**

<A-a-ninin>, which means upright man, or upright person.

**Sally Thompson**

What do you think this sign means? Number 8.

**(sign # 8 – Assiniboine)**

The Assiniboine people of Montana are split between two reservations, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck.



**Clover Smith, Assiniboine - Sioux**

I'm a part of the <Wadopana> band and the <Hudasanak> band. They are the red bottom clan and the canoe paddlers. That's what <wadopana> means, canoe paddlers.

**Sally Thompson**

Number 8. For Assiniboine, the sign, the act of paddling, canoemen.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 8) Canoe paddlers.

**Clover Smith, Assiniboine - Sioux**

The French gave the name Assiniboine to Assiniboines, but the Ojibway called us 'cooks with stone,' people who cook with stone. And the French interpreted it as Assiniboine, and so that's how we got the name Assiniboine. Otherwise, we know ourselves as Nakoda, Nakoda people. So we're Assiniboine to the French, but to us we're Nakoda people.

**Sally Thompson**

Let's review. The Gros Ventre and one band of Assiniboine are based at Fort Belknap. Another band of Assiniboine or Nakoda is based at the Fort Peck Reservation along with the Dakota and Lakota, Sioux. The word Assiniboine is a misinterpretation by some early French visitor of a name given to those people by the Ojibway. It meant 'stone boilers.' The Assiniboine call themselves...

**Clover Smith, Assiniboine - Sioux**

We know ourselves as Nakoda, Nakoda people.

**Sally Thompson**

Number 9. What do you think this sign means?

**(sign # 9 – Sioux)**

The Great Sioux Nation includes the various groups of the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota. Most people from these tribes live in South Dakota and some in North Dakota as well as Montana. Lands were reserved for Sioux people in Montana on the Fort Peck Reservation. The name Sioux, meaning snake, was created by early French Canadian traders who abbreviated the name by which another tribe referred to the Dakota...

**Clover Smith, Assiniboine - Sioux**

Nadouéssieux

**Sally Thompson**

Iroquois snake. There is disagreement about the word Sioux and where it came from. Listen to Jesse Taken Alive tell about the name Lakota.

**Jesse Taken Alive, Lakota**

We refer to ourselves as Lakota, and the books call that particular group, Sioux. What has to be corrected is that as Lakota people we literally translate that word as 'friends and

allies.' Because we are friends and allies, means that we are friends and allies to ourselves first and we must be truthful to ourselves first. And then we go on with that way of life and living as we have been for centuries.

**Sally Thompson**

Number 9. Dakota or Sioux, sign is necklace people, not cut throat as sometimes interpreted. A cutting edge is always represented by the little finger.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 9) Necklace people.

**Sally Thompson**

The Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota have names for their own groups. Yankton, for example, referred to people from the far away villages. Let's review. Lands were reserved for Sioux people in Montana on the Fort Peck Reservation. The name Sioux comes from an abbreviation of an Ojibway word with a French Canadian twist. The Great Sioux Nation includes the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota. Each one of these has many bands with their own names.

What do you think this sign means? Number 10.

**(sign # 10 – Crow)**

The Crow reservation is home to the Crow. Crow is thought to be a faulty translation of their name for themselves.

**Stan Prettypaint, Crow**

Appasalooka. In the language of our sister tribe, the Hidatsa, Appasalooka means children of the large-beaked bird.

**Sally Thompson**

Other tribes would imitate a bird in flight when referring to the...

**Stan Prettypaint, Crow**

Appasalooka

**Sally Thompson**

...in sign language. Number 10.

**Stan Prettypaint, Crow**

Crow. Appasalooka.

**Sally Thompson**

Sign represents beating of wings.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 10) Children of the large-beaked bird.

**Sally Thompson**

The whites interpreted this as the Crow, and thus called them Crow Indians. The Crow are divided into two bands.

**Stan Prettypaint, Crow**

River Crow <Crow> Mountain Crow <Crow>

**Sally Thompson**

Let's review. The Crow Reservation is home to the...

**Stan Prettypaint, Crow**

Appasalooka...

**Sally Thompson**

also known as Crow. The name Crow is a misinterpretation of sign language for a Hidatsa word that means, 'Children of the large-beaked bird.' The Crow call themselves...

**Stan Prettypaint, Crow**

Appasalooka

**Sally Thompson**

What do you think this sign means? Number 11.

**(sign # 11 – Cheyenne)**

The Cheyenne of Montana are based on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, just east of the Crow. The name Cheyenne came from the French understanding of a Sioux term.

**Ward Redbird, Northern Cheyenne**

The Sioux called us <Cheyenne> which meant 'the people of the alien speech.'

**Sally Thompson**

Number 11. Cheyenne, the sign means striped arrow feather.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 11) Striped arrow feather.

**Dr. Lanny Real Bird, Crow**

The name for Cheyenne is in reference of how their arrow feathers are. There's a lot of reverence for arrows in a lot of the regalia in their moccasins.

**Ward Redbird, Northern Cheyenne**

We call ourselves Tsis tsis'tas which means 'the people.'

**Sally Thompson**

Let's review. The Northern Cheyenne are based on a reservation just east of the Crow. Cheyenne is a misunderstanding by the French of a Sioux word. The Northern Cheyenne call themselves...

**Ward Redbird, Northern Cheyenne**

We call ourselves Tsis tsis'tas which means 'the people.'

**Sally Thompson**

Number 12. What do you think this sign means?

**(sign # 12 – Chippewa)**

Number 13. What do you think this sign means?

**(sign # 13 – Cree)**

The Chippewa and Cree of Montana have lived together so long they are like one group of people, although they are originally from separate tribes. One band has reserved lands on the Rocky Boy Reservation. The Little Shell Band of the Chippewa-Cree has no reserved lands. They are based in Great Falls. Rob Collier shows us a sign for the Chippewa, number 12. The sign means timber people, the same sign used for all Eastern Indians.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 12 ) Timber people.

**Sally Thompson**

Chippewa comes from the Algonquian word for 'puckering,' but the Chippewa refer to themselves as...

**Darcy Anaquad, Ojibway**

Anishanabe, meaning 'original people.'

**Sally Thompson**

Rob Collier shows us a sign for the Cree, number 13. Cree, the sign means Rabbit Men.

**Rob Collier, Nez Perce**

(Sign # 13) Rabbit people.

**Darcy Anaquad, Ojibway**

The Plains Cree call themselves ne hiyawak, which translates to 'those who speak the same language.' Cree also refer to themselves as iyiniwak, meaning 'plain, genuine, natural people.'

**Sally Thompson**

Let's review. The Chippewa and Cree live on the Rocky Boy Reservation. The Little Shell Band of the Chippewa-Cree has no reserved lands. Neighboring groups on the plains called the Chippewa 'Timber People.' The Cree are known by some of their neighbors as 'Rabbit Men.' The Chippewa call themselves...

**Darcy Anaquad, Ojibway**

Anishanabe, meaning 'original people.' The Plains Cree call themselves ne hiyawak, which translates to 'those who speak the same language.' Cree also refer to themselves as iyiniwak, meaning 'plain, genuine, natural people.'

**CHAPTER 5 (TRT: 3:37)**

**CLASS EXERCISE – TRY TO MAKE THESE DIFFERENT SIGNS**

**Sally Thompson**

I bet you would like to see those signs again. Stand up. Make sure you have room to spread your arms and see if you can learn these signs by following along.

Kootenai, sign for white tailed deer.

Pend d'Oreille, the sign indicates ear pendant.

**Frances Vanderburg, Salish**

Salish

**Sally Thompson**

Sign indicates head flat on sides.

**Iris Pretty Paint, Pikuni**

Blackfoot

**Sally Thompson**

The sign indicates black moccasins.

**Iris Pretty Paint, Pikuni**

Blood

**Sally Thompson**

The act of wiping off a bloody nose

**Iris Pretty Paint, Pikuni**

Piegan, or Pikuni in our language

**Sally Thompson**

The sign represents rubbing cheek with rawhide spot in a robe.

Gros Ventre, the sign for the falls.

For Assiniboine, the sign, the act of paddling.

Dakota, or Sioux. The sign is necklace people.

**Stan Pretty Paint, Crow**

Crow. Appasalooka

**Sally Thompson**

Sign represents beating of wings.

Cheyenne, the sign means striped arrow feather.

Chippewa, the sign means timber people.  
Cree, the sign means rabbit men.

### **REVIEW/WRAP**

#### **Sally Thompson**

Look at all that you have learned. You know all the tribes of Montana and where they live. You know the names they call themselves and what others call them. You know which ones are misnomers and how they came to be used, and you know the signs for each of these tribes.

#### **Rob Collier, Nez Perce.**

Now go practice with each other.